

VZCZCXRO2816  
PP RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHTU #0843 3221201  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 181201Z NOV 09 ZDK CTG UR MISSING MCN SVC  
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6990  
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE  
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0103  
RUEHRN/USMISSION UN ROME 0005

UNCLAS TUNIS 000843

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EEB/TPP/MTAA/ABT AND NEA/MAG  
RABAT FOR FAS (AHMED)

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [ETRD](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIA AND THE WORLD SUMMIT ON FOOD SECURITY

REF: A. TUNIS 799  
[B](#). TUNIS 781  
[C](#). STATE 107298

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) The Government of Tunisia (GOT) has underscored its commitment to food security by promoting itself as a leader on the issue on the domestic and international fronts. President Ben Ali attended the Rome World Summit on Food Security and all major Tunisian media outlets have devoted their front page to his speech. Additionally, the GOT pledged its support for the "Partnering on Food Security" initiative (refs B and C) and called for increased support to other initiatives, such as the "World Solidarity Fund," proposed by Tunisia and adopted by the UN General Assembly in [1](#)2002. Despite its continuing market-oriented reforms in other sectors, however, Tunisia remains dependent on heavy state control to maintain food security for its own population. End summary.

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Much ado about food security  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) In a November 9 letter addressed to the Secretary, Tunisian Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah pledged Tunisia's support for the "Partnering on Food Security" initiative, lauding the willingness of the international community "to assure the most fundamental human right, the right to food." Abdallah expressed support for the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (an initiative of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) launched in 2002) and reiterated Tunisia's call for financial support to the "World Solidarity Fund" (proposed by Tunisia and adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2002).

[1](#)3. (SBU) The front page of state-owned La Presse newspaper was almost entirely devoted to coverage of President Ben Ali's appearance at the World Summit on Food Security, including key points from Ben Ali's speech, a description of his meetings with other heads of state, and an editorial on "Ben Ali and the Inalienable Value of Humanity." Both La Presse and Le Temps, a daily owned by Ben Ali's son-in-law Mohammed Sakhr El-Materi, published the full text of Ben Ali's speech and highlighted both the success of Tunisia's agriculture sector and Ben Ali's call for increased funding for the "World Solidarity Fund."

[1](#)4. (SBU) On the home front, the Government of Tunisia (GOT)

plays an active role in ensuring an adequate food supply. The key subsistence crop, wheat, is subsidized through direct support to farmers, and the GOT controls all wheat importation and distribution. Prices for bread, couscous, and pasta have been kept low since bread riots in 1984 threatened to topple the government of then-president Habib Bourguiba. The GOT invests heavily in the agriculture sector, which recorded six percent growth in 2009. Agriculture minister Abdessalem Mansour is a skilled technocrat whose stated goal is to achieve self-sufficiency in cereals and who has confirmed his interest in cooperating with the United States on agricultural programs (ref A).

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Comment  
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15. (SBU) Paradoxically, as Tunisia opens to the global economy through increased trade and financial sector reforms, the GOT relies on statist, anti-trade policies and practices to ensure food security. Its association agreement with Europe does not include trade in agriculture, and negotiations to include the sector are progressing slowly. The complicated price control system for bread, couscous, and pasta is incompatible with the market-oriented reforms the GOT is pursuing in other areas. Still sensitive to the bread riots in 1984 and concerned above all else with stability, the GOT will likely maintain protectionist food security policies for the foreseeable future yet play up the issue on the international stage. End comment.

GRAY